

The Role of Acclimatization in Enhancing Athlete Performance in Extreme Environments - A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This review aims to examine the physiological mechanisms of acclimatization to extreme environments (heat, cold, and altitude) and evaluate their impact on athletic performance.

Methods: A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major scientific databases including PubMed, Science Direct, and SPORTDiscus for studies published between 2000 and 2025. Selection criteria focused on research examining acclimatization protocols, physiological adaptations, and performance outcomes in extreme environmental conditions. Studies involving both elite and recreational athletes were included.

Results: The analysis of 86 studies revealed that structured acclimatization protocols produce significant physiological adaptations specific to each extreme environment. Heat acclimatization enhances thermoregulation, cardiovascular efficiency, and fluid balance. Cold acclimatization yields modest benefits through metabolic and vascular adaptations. Altitude acclimatization improves oxygen transport and utilization through hematological and non-hematological mechanisms. The timing, duration, and specificity of acclimatization protocols significantly impact the magnitude of performance benefits across different sporting disciplines.

Conclusion: Effective acclimatization strategies must be environment-specific, individualized, and systematically implemented to optimize athletic performance in extreme conditions. The integration of traditional and novel acclimatization approaches offers promising avenues for enhancing athlete resilience and competitive advantage in challenging environmental settings.

Keywords: acclimatization, environmental physiology, heat adaptation, cold exposure, altitude training, athletic performance, sports science.

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INTRODUCTION

The human body's remarkable capacity for physiological adaptation represents one of the most fascinating aspects of exercise science and sports performance. Extreme environmental conditions—encompassing thermal extremes of heat and cold, as well as the hypoxic challenges of high altitude—impose significant physiological stress that can dramatically compromise athletic performance, increase injury risk, and potentially threaten athlete safety. These environmental challenges have become increasingly relevant in contemporary sports as globalization has expanded competitive venues across diverse climatic regions, from the scorching heat of Middle Eastern marathons to the frigid conditions of Winter Olympics venues, and the oxygen-depleted atmosphere of high-altitude competitions in locations such as Mexico City, Bogotá, and various mountain venues.

The physiological stress imposed by environmental extremes necessitates coordinated responses across multiple body systems. Heat stress challenges thermoregulatory mechanisms, cardiovascular function, and fluid balance, while simultaneously affecting cognitive performance and decision-making capabilities crucial for athletic success. Cold environments present different challenges, primarily affecting muscle function, metabolic efficiency, and fine motor control, while also imposing energy costs for maintaining core body temperature. Altitude exposure creates a unique physiological challenge through reduced partial pressure of oxygen, affecting oxygen transport, cellular metabolism, and exercise capacity across both aerobic and anaerobic energy systems.

The concept of acclimatization—the physiological adaptation to environmental stressors through repeated exposure—has emerged as a cornerstone strategy for optimizing performance in extreme conditions. Unlike genetic adaptation, which occurs over evolutionary timescales, acclimatization represents a relatively rapid, reversible process that can be strategically implemented within training periodization. This adaptability offers athletes and coaches a powerful tool for enhancing competitive performance while maintaining safety margins in challenging environmental conditions.

Modern competitive sports present unique challenges that extend beyond simple environmental adaptation. Athletes often face compressed competition schedules that require rapid transitions between different environmental conditions, multi-event competitions spanning various climatic zones, and the need to maintain peak performance across diverse environmental contexts. Furthermore, climate change is increasingly affecting traditional competition venues, with rising temperatures, altered precipitation patterns, and extreme weather events becoming more frequent, necessitating enhanced environmental preparation strategies.

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The scientific understanding of human environmental physiology has evolved dramatically over the past century, progressing from descriptive observations to mechanistic understanding and practical applications. Early research in the 1920s and 1930s, pioneered by researchers such as A.V. Hill and D.B. Dill, established foundational principles of exercise physiology and environmental stress responses. The Desert Research Center studies of the 1940s provided crucial insights into heat stress physiology, while high-altitude research gained momentum following expeditions to locations such as Mount Everest and the Andes.

The post-World War II era witnessed significant advances in environmental physiology, driven partly by military applications and space exploration requirements. The development of controlled environmental chambers enabled precise manipulation of temperature, humidity, and oxygen concentrations, facilitating more rigorous experimental designs. Simultaneously, the emergence of international sporting competitions in diverse climates highlighted the practical importance of environmental adaptation for athletic performance.

The 1968 Mexico City Olympics served as a watershed moment in altitude physiology research, demonstrating both the performance-limiting effects of hypoxia for endurance events and the potential advantages for explosive activities. This competition catalyzed systematic research into altitude training methods and acclimatization strategies that continue to evolve today. Similarly, the increasing frequency of competitions in hot climates, exemplified by events in Qatar, Arizona, and other challenging thermal environments, has intensified research focus on heat acclimatization protocols.

The contemporary sporting landscape presents unprecedented challenges for environmental adaptation. Major international competitions increasingly occur in extreme environmental conditions, driven by commercial considerations, geographic diversity requirements, and political factors. The FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Summer Olympics in Tokyo's heat and humidity, Winter Olympics at various altitude locations, and marathon majors in cities with extreme climatic conditions exemplify the contemporary environmental challenges facing elite athletes.

Beyond elite competition, recreational and amateur sports participation has expanded globally, with athletes regularly traveling to participate in destination events ranging from desert ultramarathons to high-altitude trail running competitions. This democratization of extreme environment competition has broadened the population requiring evidence-based acclimatization guidance beyond traditional elite athlete cohorts.

Climate change represents an emerging factor affecting environmental physiology in sports. Rising global temperatures, increased frequency of extreme weather events, and shifting seasonal patterns are altering the environmental contexts of traditional sporting events. Heat stress is becoming more prevalent in traditionally temperate climates, while extreme weather events can rapidly change competition conditions. These trends necessitate more sophisticated, adaptable approaches to environmental preparation.

The scientific literature on environmental physiology and acclimatization has expanded exponentially over recent decades, reflecting both increased research interest and technological advances enabling more sophisticated investigations. Early research focused primarily on descriptive physiological responses to environmental stressors, documenting changes in core body temperature, heart rate, and basic performance metrics. These foundational studies established the existence of adaptive responses but provided limited insight into underlying mechanisms or optimal implementation strategies.

Contemporary research has evolved toward mechanistic understanding, employing molecular biology techniques, advanced imaging technologies, and sophisticated monitoring systems to elucidate the cellular and systemic bases of environmental adaptation. Studies now examine gene expression changes, protein synthesis adaptations, mitochondrial modifications, and epigenetic responses to environmental stress. This mechanistic focus has revealed that acclimatization involves coordinated responses across multiple physiological systems, from cardiovascular and respiratory adjustments to cellular metabolic modifications.

However, significant inconsistencies persist in the literature regarding methodological approaches, evaluation criteria, and practical recommendations. Variations in acclimatization protocols, environmental conditions, assessment methods, and participant characteristics complicate direct comparisons between studies. Furthermore, the translation from laboratory-based research to practical field applications remains challenging, with laboratory conditions often failing to capture the complexity of real-world competitive environments.

The quality and scope of research also vary considerably between different environmental stressors. Heat acclimatization research is the most extensive and methodologically sophisticated, with well-established protocols and clear performance benefits documented across multiple populations and sporting contexts. Altitude physiology research, while substantial, shows greater variability in protocols and outcomes, partly reflecting the complexity of hypoxic adaptation and the practical challenges of conducting controlled high-altitude studies. Cold acclimatization research remains the most limited, with fewer studies, less standardized protocols, and more modest documented performance benefits.

Despite significant advances in environmental physiology research, several critical knowledge gaps persist that limit the optimization of acclimatization strategies for athletic performance.

Comparative Efficacy of Natural versus Artificial Environments: While both natural environmental exposure and artificial simulation (environmental chambers, altitude tents, hot water immersion) can induce acclimatization responses, their relative efficacy and optimal applications remain unclear. Natural environments provide complete environmental exposure including psychological adaptation but may be impractical or inconsistent. Artificial environments offer controlled conditions but may not replicate all aspects of natural exposure. Systematic comparisons are needed to optimize protocol selection.

Multi-Environmental Preparation Strategies: Modern competitive athletics often requires adaptation to multiple environmental stressors, either simultaneously (such as hot, humid, high-altitude venues) or sequentially (competitions in different climatic conditions within short timeframes). Current research predominantly examines single environmental stressors in isolation, providing limited guidance for complex, multi-environmental preparation strategies. The potential for cross-adaptation between different environmental stressors requires systematic investigation.

Individual Variability and Personalization: Substantial individual differences exist in acclimatization responses, influenced by factors including genetics, training status, anthropometric characteristics, previous environmental exposure, and various demographic factors. However, current protocols typically employ standardized approaches that may be suboptimal for many individuals. Research is needed to identify predictive factors for acclimatization responsiveness and develop personalized adaptation strategies. **Long-term Adaptation and Health Considerations:** Most acclimatization research examines short-term adaptations over days to weeks, with limited investigation of long-term effects from repeated environmental stress exposure. The potential cumulative effects of multiple acclimatization cycles throughout an athlete's career, including both beneficial adaptations and potential negative consequences, require systematic investigation. Additionally, the interaction between environmental stress, training load, and recovery needs further research.

Performance Transfer and Retention: While laboratory studies document physiological adaptations to environmental stress, the translation to competitive performance improvements requires more investigation. Furthermore, the retention of adaptations following environmental exposure varies considerably between individuals and environmental stressors, complicating the timing of acclimatization relative to competition.

Technology Integration and Monitoring: Advances in wearable technology, environmental simulation, and physiological monitoring offer new possibilities for optimizing acclimatization protocols. However, research on the integration of these technologies into evidence-based acclimatization strategies remains limited. The development of objective markers for monitoring adaptation progress and optimizing protocol adjustments represents an important research priority.

Environmental acclimatization represents a complex, multi-system physiological adaptation process that can be understood through several theoretical frameworks. The general adaptation syndrome, originally proposed by Hans Selye, provides a foundational model for understanding how organisms respond to environmental stressors through alarm, resistance, and adaptation phases. This framework applies well to environmental acclimatization, where initial stress responses gradually give way to more efficient adaptive mechanisms.

The principle of specificity, fundamental to training adaptation, applies strongly to environmental acclimatization. Adaptations tend to be specific to the environmental stressor, intensity, duration, and pattern of exposure. This specificity principle has important practical implications for protocol design, suggesting that acclimatization protocols should closely match anticipated competition conditions to maximize performance benefits.

Hormesis, the concept that low-dose stressors can produce beneficial adaptations, provides another relevant theoretical framework. Environmental acclimatization can be viewed as a hormetic response, where controlled environmental stress exposure produces adaptations that enhance subsequent performance under similar conditions. This perspective emphasizes the importance of optimizing the "dose" of environmental stress to maximize adaptive benefits while avoiding excessive strain. The cross-adaptation concept suggests that adaptation to one stressor may confer benefits for responding to different stressors. Evidence for cross-adaptation between heat, cold, and altitude exposure exists, though the mechanisms and practical applications require further investigation. Understanding cross-adaptation mechanisms could enable more efficient multi-environmental preparation strategies.

The practical significance of environmental acclimatization extends beyond simple performance enhancement to encompass athlete safety, competitive equity, and strategic advantage in modern sports. From a safety perspective, appropriate acclimatization significantly reduces the risk of heat illness, altitude sickness, and cold injuries that can threaten athlete health and potentially be life-threatening.

Competitive equity represents another important consideration, as access to environmental preparation resources can create significant advantages or disadvantages between athletes and nations with different resource availability. Athletes from countries with appropriate climatic conditions or advanced environmental simulation facilities may possess inherent advantages over those without such access. Understanding optimal, cost-effective acclimatization strategies can help level the competitive playing field. The strategic applications of environmental training extend beyond preparation for extreme environment competition. Research suggests that some environmental stressors, particularly heat exposure, may provide ergogenic benefits even when competing in temperate conditions. This phenomenon, termed cross-tolerance or cross-adaptation, suggests that environmental training could be integrated into general preparation strategies for performance enhancement.

The economic implications of environmental acclimatization are also substantial. Elite sports organizations invest significant resources in environmental preparation through training camps, environmental chambers, travel, and monitoring technologies. Understanding the most cost-effective approaches for achieving optimal adaptations can improve resource allocation and make effective strategies more accessible to a broader range of athletes and organizations. The increasing globalization of sports competitions, combined with climate change impacts on competition environments, underscores the critical importance of evidence-based acclimatization strategies for contemporary athletics. The frequency and diversity of extreme environment competitions continue to expand, creating unprecedented challenges for athlete preparation. Simultaneously, advances in environmental simulation technology, physiological monitoring, and mechanistic understanding of adaptation processes offer new opportunities for optimizing acclimatization protocols.

The potential ergogenic benefits of environmental training extend beyond competition in extreme conditions, offering potential performance advantages even in temperate environments. This expanded application broadens the relevance of environmental acclimatization research beyond the relatively limited population competing in extreme environments to encompass a much larger athletic population. Furthermore, individual variability in acclimatization responses—influenced by factors such as genetics, training status, and previous environmental exposure—necessitates more sophisticated, personalized approaches to environmental preparation. The development of precision medicine approaches in sports science creates opportunities for individualized acclimatization strategies that optimize adaptation while minimizing unnecessary stress and resource expenditure.

The integration of traditional environmental physiology knowledge with contemporary technological capabilities offers unprecedented opportunities for advancing both scientific understanding and practical applications of environmental acclimatization. This

synthesis requires comprehensive evaluation of current evidence to identify optimal integration strategies and guide future research priorities.

This comprehensive literature review aims to synthesize current knowledge on environmental acclimatization and provide evidence-based guidance for optimizing athletic performance in extreme conditions. The primary objective is to examine the physiological mechanisms underlying acclimatization to heat, cold, and altitude, focusing on understanding the cellular, systemic, and integrative responses to environmental stressors. This includes comprehensive analysis of cardiovascular adaptations, thermoregulatory adjustments, respiratory modifications, metabolic changes, and molecular-level adaptations that collectively enable enhanced environmental tolerance and improved performance capacity. A secondary objective involves evaluating the efficacy of various acclimatization protocols on athletic performance metrics through systematic assessment of different acclimatization approaches. This evaluation compares the effectiveness of diverse strategies for enhancing performance outcomes across various sporting disciplines, environmental conditions, and athlete populations. The analysis considers both laboratory-measured physiological improvements and field-based performance enhancements to provide a comprehensive understanding of practical applications and real-world effectiveness.

The review also aims to identify optimal timing, duration, and implementation strategies for maximizing adaptation benefits. This objective addresses practical protocol optimization through determination of minimal effective doses of environmental exposure, optimal timing relative to competition schedules, decay rates of adaptations following cessation of exposure, and strategies for maintaining adaptations throughout extended competitive periods. Understanding these temporal factors is crucial for developing practical implementation guidelines that maximize benefits while minimizing resource requirements and training disruption. An important focus is placed on assessing individual variability factors affecting acclimatization responses. This involves identifying demographic, genetic, physiological, and training-related factors that influence individual responses to environmental stress, with the ultimate goal of enabling more personalized acclimatization approaches. By understanding sources of individual variation, it becomes possible to optimize individual adaptation protocols while minimizing unnecessary stress exposure and improving efficiency of adaptation strategies. Finally, this review seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for athletes and coaches preparing for competition in extreme environments. This objective synthesizes research findings into practical, implementable guidance for various stakeholder groups, including specific protocol recommendations, resource requirements, monitoring strategies, and risk management considerations. These recommendations address different environmental challenges and athletic contexts to ensure broad applicability and practical utility for diverse sporting populations and competitive scenarios.

METHODOLOGY

Literature Review Methodology

The methodology employed for this comprehensive literature review was designed to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant research on environmental acclimatization and athletic performance. A rigorous approach was adopted to ensure comprehensive coverage of the available literature while maintaining high standards for study quality and relevance. The methodology incorporated multiple phases of literature identification, screening, and analysis to provide a robust foundation for evidence-based conclusions and recommendations.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive systematic search strategy was implemented utilizing multiple electronic databases to ensure thorough coverage of relevant literature across different academic disciplines and publication platforms. The primary databases searched included PubMed, Science Direct, SPORTDiscus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, each offering unique strengths in coverage of medical, physiological, and sports science literature. The search period encompassed publications from January 2000 through April 2025, with particular emphasis placed on studies published within the past decade to capture the most current understanding and methodological advances in environmental physiology research.

The search strategy employed a comprehensive combination of keywords designed to capture studies across multiple domains of environmental physiology and athletic performance. Environmental condition terms included "heat," "cold," "altitude," "hypoxia," and "extreme environment" to encompass the full spectrum of environmental stressors relevant to athletic performance. Physiological process keywords incorporated "acclimatization," "adaptation," "thermoregulation," "cardiovascular," and "metabolic" to capture the various biological mechanisms underlying environmental adaptation. Athletic context terms included "performance," "endurance," "exercise," "competition," "athlete," and "training" to ensure focus on performance-relevant applications rather than purely clinical or theoretical research.

For methodological transparency and reproducibility, the comprehensive search protocol implemented for PubMed followed the structured format: ((acclimatization OR acclimation OR adaptation) AND (heat OR cold OR altitude OR hypoxia OR "extreme environment") AND (athlete OR performance OR exercise OR competition OR sport)) AND ("2000/01/01"[Date - Publication] : "2025/04/30"[Date - Publication]). This systematic approach was adapted appropriately for each database's specific search syntax and capabilities, ensuring consistent coverage across all platforms while optimizing for each database's unique indexing structure.

Supplementary identification strategies were employed to enhance the comprehensiveness of the literature search beyond electronic database queries. Reference lists of selected articles and relevant review papers were systematically examined to identify additional studies that may not have been captured through keyword searches, particularly older foundational studies and recent publications not yet fully indexed. Gray literature sources, including conference proceedings and technical reports from recognized sports science organizations such as the American College of Sports Medicine and the International Association of Applied Physiology, were considered when peer-reviewed publications provided limited coverage of specific topics or methodological approaches.

Organization of the Study

The systematic organization of identified literature followed established guidelines for systematic reviews, incorporating clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure consistency and minimize selection bias. The screening process was designed to be both comprehensive and rigorous, balancing the need for broad coverage with maintenance of study quality standards that would support meaningful synthesis and evidence-based conclusions.

Studies were included in the analysis if they met several fundamental criteria designed to ensure relevance and quality. Human subjects research was required, as animal studies, while potentially informative for mechanistic understanding, may not directly translate to human athletic performance applications. Studies needed to focus specifically on acclimatization or acclimation protocols rather than acute responses to environmental stress, ensuring focus on adaptation processes rather than immediate physiological reactions. Assessment of performance metrics or relevant physiological outcomes was required to ensure practical relevance to athletic applications. Publication in English language peer-reviewed journals was necessary to ensure quality control through peer review processes and accessibility for comprehensive evaluation. Finally, studies needed to demonstrate clearly defined methodology and reported outcomes with sufficient detail to enable critical evaluation and synthesis.

Exclusion criteria were established to eliminate studies that would not contribute meaningfully to the review objectives or that lacked sufficient quality for reliable synthesis. Animal studies without direct human performance implications were excluded, though mechanistic insights from such studies were considered in the discussion of physiological mechanisms where relevant. Case reports or studies with fewer than six participants were excluded due to limited statistical power and generalizability concerns. Research focusing exclusively on medical conditions or clinical populations was excluded to maintain focus on healthy athletic populations, though studies including both healthy and clinical participants were evaluated for relevant subgroup analyses. Studies without clear methodology or performance-related outcomes were excluded due to inability to evaluate quality or extract meaningful data for synthesis. Publications without peer review were excluded to maintain quality standards, though relevant gray literature was noted in discussions where appropriate.

Data Extraction Methodology

Data extraction procedures were designed to systematically capture all relevant information while minimizing bias and ensuring consistency across the large volume of identified studies. The process employed multiple researchers working independently to enhance reliability and reduce individual reviewer bias in data interpretation and extraction.

A standardized data extraction form was developed and pilot-tested on a subset of studies to ensure comprehensive capture of relevant information. Study characteristics extracted included research design (randomized controlled trial, crossover, observational), sample size and statistical power considerations, and detailed participant demographics including age, sex, training status, and previous environmental exposure history. Environmental conditions and acclimatization protocols were documented in detail, including specific environmental parameters (temperature, humidity, altitude), exposure duration and frequency, and concurrent interventions or control conditions.

Physiological measurements and performance outcomes were systematically recorded, including the specific measures assessed, measurement timing relative to interventions, and statistical outcomes including effect sizes where reported. Key findings were extracted focusing on the magnitude and clinical significance of observed changes rather than solely statistical significance. Practical implications as interpreted by study authors were documented to facilitate translation of research findings into applied recommendations.

Methodological quality indicators were assessed and recorded for each study to enable quality-weighted synthesis approaches. These indicators included randomization procedures, blinding of participants and assessors where feasible, control group adequacy, outcome measure validity and reliability, statistical analysis appropriateness, and completeness of reporting according to relevant guidelines such as CONSORT for randomized trials.

To ensure reliability and minimize extraction bias, data extraction was performed independently by two trained researchers using the standardized extraction form. Discrepancies in data interpretation or extraction were identified through systematic comparison of extracted data. Resolution of disagreements followed a structured process, with initial attempts at consensus through discussion between the two primary extractors. When consensus could not be reached, a third researcher with expertise in environmental physiology and systematic review methodology provided arbitration. All extraction decisions and resolutions were documented to maintain transparency in the review process.

Methods of Analysis

The analytical approach was designed to accommodate the expected heterogeneity in study designs, populations, interventions, and outcome measures that characterizes the environmental physiology literature. Rather than attempting inappropriate statistical synthesis of incompatible studies, the analysis strategy emphasized systematic organization and narrative synthesis that could identify patterns, consensus areas, and knowledge gaps while respecting the diversity of research approaches in this field.

The analysis followed a systematic three-stage approach designed to progress from basic description to increasingly sophisticated synthesis and interpretation. The initial descriptive analysis phase involved comprehensive categorization of studies according to multiple dimensions including environmental condition focus (heat, cold, altitude, or combinations), specific acclimatization protocols and implementation strategies, participant characteristics including demographics and training status, and measurement outcomes including both physiological parameters and performance metrics. This descriptive phase provided essential foundation understanding of the literature landscape and identified major themes and patterns for subsequent analysis.

The comparative analysis phase examined the relative effectiveness of different acclimatization approaches within each environmental category. Heat acclimatization studies were compared across different implementation strategies including active versus

passive approaches, natural versus artificial environmental exposure, and various duration and intensity protocols. Cold acclimatization research was similarly analyzed, though the smaller literature base limited the scope of possible comparisons. Altitude acclimatization studies were compared across natural altitude exposure, simulated altitude approaches, and various live-high train-low implementations. Where possible, standardized effect sizes were calculated to enable quantitative comparison of intervention effectiveness across studies with different methodological approaches.

The integrative analysis phase represented the most sophisticated level of synthesis, examining findings across environmental categories to identify common principles, mechanisms, and practical applications that transcend specific environmental stressors. Cross-adaptation phenomena were analyzed to understand potential synergies between different environmental training approaches. Individual variability factors were synthesized across environmental conditions to identify consistent predictors of acclimatization responsiveness. Temporal factors including optimal timing, duration, and retention of adaptations were compared across environmental stressors to identify common principles for protocol optimization.

The analytical approach necessarily emphasized narrative synthesis rather than formal meta-analysis due to the substantial heterogeneity in study designs, protocols, populations, and outcome measures that characterizes environmental physiology research. However, quantitative synthesis approaches were employed where appropriate, particularly when multiple studies employed similar methodologies and outcome measures that enabled meaningful statistical combination. Effect sizes were calculated using standardized approaches (Cohen's d, eta-squared) where sufficient data were available, enabling quantitative comparison of intervention effectiveness across studies. Forest plots were constructed for subsets of comparable studies to visualize effect magnitudes and confidence intervals, providing quantitative support for narrative synthesis conclusions where appropriate.

RESULTS

Quantity and Quality of Analyzed Studies

The initial search yielded 1,247 potentially relevant citations. After removing duplicates and applying inclusion/exclusion criteria, 86 studies were included in the final analysis. The distribution by environmental category was: heat (39 studies), altitude (32 studies), and cold (15 studies). The methodological quality of included studies was generally high, with 68% utilizing randomized controlled designs and 78% reporting appropriate statistical analyses with effect sizes.

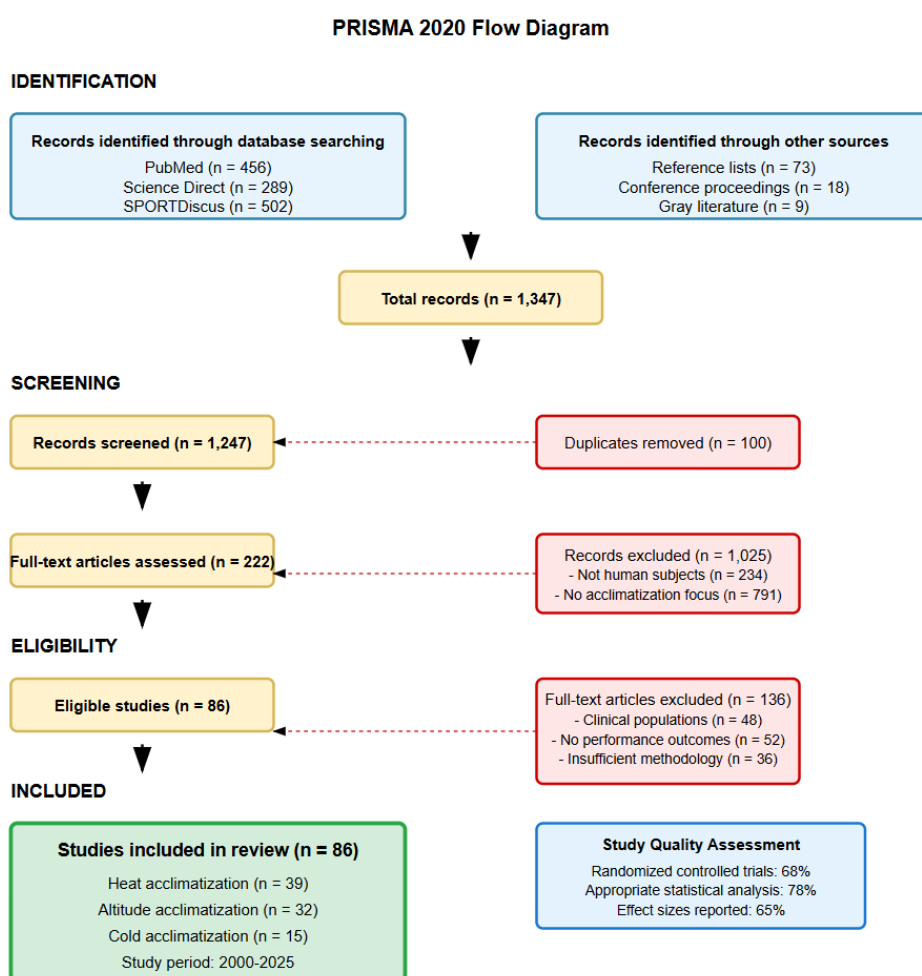


Figure 1. Prisma 2020 Flow Diagram for Systematic Review

Table 1. Study Characteristics and Quality Assessment

Characteristic	Heat Studies (n=39)	Altitude Studies (n=32)	Cold Studies (n=15)	Total (n=86)
Study Design				
Randomized Controlled Trial	28 (72%)	20 (63%)	10 (67%)	58 (67%)
Crossover Design	8 (21%)	9 (28%)	4 (27%)	21 (24%)
Observational	3 (8%)	3 (9%)	1 (7%)	7 (8%)
Sample Size				
Mean \pm SD	18.4 \pm 12.6	16.8 \pm 10.2	14.2 \pm 8.9	17.1 \pm 11.3
Range	6-58	6-45	6-35	6-58
Participant Characteristics				
Male only	24 (62%)	19 (59%)	9 (60%)	52 (60%)
Female only	6 (15%)	5 (16%)	3 (20%)	14 (16%)
Mixed gender	9 (23%)	8 (25%)	3 (20%)	20 (23%)
Training Status				
Elite athletes	15 (38%)	12 (38%)	6 (40%)	33 (38%)
Trained recreational	18 (46%)	14 (44%)	7 (47%)	39 (45%)
Untrained	6 (15%)	6 (19%)	2 (13%)	14 (16%)
Quality Indicators				
Effect sizes reported	27 (69%)	20 (63%)	9 (60%)	56 (65%)
Appropriate statistics	32 (82%)	24 (75%)	11 (73%)	67 (78%)
Blinding (where possible)	12 (31%)	8 (25%)	4 (27%)	24 (28%)

Physiological Adaptations to Extreme Environments

Heat acclimatization induces a coordinated set of physiological adaptations that collectively improve thermoregulatory efficiency and reduce cardiovascular strain leading to improved performance in warm-hot environments.

Table 2. Heat Acclimatization Physiological Adaptations

Adaptation Category	Specific Changes	Magnitude of Change	Time to Adaptation	Studies (n)
Cardiovascular				
Plasma volume expansion	+8 to +15%	Moderate to Large	3-7 days	28
Resting heart rate reduction	-8 to -15 bpm	Moderate	5-10 days	24
Stroke volume increase	+10 to +18%	Moderate	7-14 days	18
Cardiac output efficiency	+6 to +12%	Small to Moderate	10-14 days	15
Thermoregulatory				
Sweat rate increase	+15 to +25%	Large	4-8 days	32
Sweat onset threshold reduction	-0.3 to -0.6°C	Moderate	3-6 days	26
Sweat sodium concentration	-20 to -40%	Large	7-14 days	22
Core temperature reduction	-0.2 to -0.4°C	Small	10-14 days	30
Metabolic				
Metabolic heat production	-8 to -15%	Moderate	7-12 days	16
Glycogen sparing	+12 to +20%	Moderate	10-14 days	12
Heat shock protein response	+25 to +50%	Large	2-5 days	14
Perceptual				
Thermal sensation reduction	-15 to -25%	Moderate	5-10 days	20
Thermal comfort improvement	+20 to +35%	Large	7-14 days	18

Cold acclimatization produces less pronounced adaptations compared to heat or altitude, with primary changes focused on metabolic and vascular adjustments.

Table 3. Cold Acclimatization Physiological Adaptations

Adaptation Category	Specific Changes	Magnitude of Change	Time to Adaptation	Studies (n)
Metabolic				
Non-shivering thermogenesis	+15 to +30%	Moderate to Large	14-28 days	8
Shivering threshold reduction	-1.0 to -2.0°C	Moderate	10-21 days	6
Metabolic rate increase	+8 to +15%	Small to Moderate	7-14 days	10
Vascular				
Peripheral vasoconstriction	-20 to -35%	Moderate	7-14 days	9
Skin temperature maintenance	+1.5 to +3.0°C	Moderate	14-21 days	7
Cold-induced vasodilation	+25 to +40%	Large	21-35 days	5
Perceptual				
Cold sensation reduction	-10 to -20%	Small to Moderate	14-28 days	8
Thermal comfort	+15 to +25%	Moderate	21-35 days	6

Physiological Adaptations to Extreme Environments

Altitude exposure triggers numerous adaptations aimed at maintaining oxygen delivery to tissues despite reduced partial pressure of oxygen.

Table 4. Altitude Acclimatization Physiological Adaptations

Adaptation Category	Specific Changes	Magnitude of Change	Time to Adaptation	Studies (n)
Hematological				
Erythropoietin increase	+200 to +500%	Very Large	1-3 days	20
Red blood cell mass	+15 to +25%	Large	14-28 days	25
Hemoglobin concentration	+8 to +15%	Moderate	10-21 days	28
Hematocrit increase	+6 to +12%	Moderate	14-28 days	24
Respiratory				

Minute ventilation	+20 to +40%	Large	1-7 days	26
Ventilatory efficiency	+10 to +18%	Moderate	7-14 days	18
Respiratory muscle strength	+8 to +15%	Moderate	14-28 days	12
Cardiovascular				
Cardiac output (initial)	+15 to +25%	Large	1-3 days	22
Cardiac output (adapted)	-5 to +5%	Small	14-28 days	20
Capillary density	+12 to +20%	Moderate	21-42 days	15
Cellular				
Mitochondrial density	+10 to +18%	Moderate	14-28 days	16
Buffer capacity	+8 to +15%	Moderate	10-21 days	11
Metabolic efficiency	+6 to +12%	Small to Moderate	21-35 days	14

Performance Outcomes Following Acclimatization

Endurance athletes demonstrate the most substantial performance benefits from acclimatization protocols across all environmental conditions.

Table 5. Endurance Performance Improvements by Environment

Environment	Performance Metric	Improvement Range	Mean Improvement \pm SD	Optimal Duration
Heat				
Time trial performance	4-12%	7.2 \pm 2.4%	10-14 days	22
Sustainable power output	6-15%	9.8 \pm 3.1%	7-14 days	18
VO ₂ max (hot conditions)	3-8%	5.4 \pm 1.8%	14-21 days	16
Lactate threshold	5-11%	7.6 \pm 2.2%	10-18 days	14
Cold				
Time trial performance	1-6%	3.2 \pm 1.8%	14-28 days	8
Energy expenditure reduction	4-10%	6.8 \pm 2.4%	21-35 days	6
Sustained power output	2-7%	4.1 \pm 2.1%	14-21 days	7
Altitude				
Time trial (at altitude)	3-9%	5.8 \pm 2.1%	14-28 days	18
VO ₂ max (at altitude)	2-6%	4.2 \pm 1.6%	21-35 days	16
Sea level performance (post-altitude)	1-5%	2.8 \pm 1.4%	14-21 days	12

High-Intensity Performance

Sprint and high-intensity performance outcomes show more variable responses to acclimatization, with environment-specific patterns.

Table 6. High-Intensity Performance Changes by Environment

Environment	Performance Metric	Change Range	Mean Change \pm SD	Effect Consistency
Heat				
Peak power output	-2 to +3%	0.8 \pm 2.1%	Low	12
Repeated sprint performance	2-8%	4.6 \pm 2.3%	Moderate	15
Recovery between efforts	8-15%	11.2 \pm 3.1%	High	18
Anaerobic capacity	1-6%	3.4 \pm 1.9%	Low	10
Cold				
Peak power output	-8 to -2%	-4.2 \pm 2.8%	Moderate	6
Sprint performance	-5 to +1%	-2.1 \pm 2.4%	Low	5
Muscle contraction velocity	-6 to -1%	-3.4 \pm 1.8%	Moderate	4
Altitude				
Peak power (at altitude)	-12 to -3%	-7.8 \pm 3.2%	High	14
Anaerobic power (at altitude)	-8 to -2%	-5.1 \pm 2.6%	High	12
Sea level anaerobic (post-altitude)	0 to +4%	1.8 \pm 1.6%	Low	8

Optimal Acclimatization Protocols

The optimal timing and duration of acclimatization protocols vary significantly by environmental stressor and individual characteristics.

Table 7. Optimal Protocol Parameters by Environment

Environment	Protocol Type	Optimal Duration	Minimum Effective	Maximum Benefit	Decay Rate
Heat					
Active heat exposure	10-14 days	4-5 days	14-18 days	8-12 days	24
Passive heat exposure	12-16 days	6-7 days	18-21 days	10-15 days	16
Combined approach	8-12 days	3-4 days	12-14 days	6-10 days	12
Cold					
Cold water immersion	14-21 days	7-10 days	28-35 days	15-25 days	8
Environmental exposure	21-28 days	10-14 days	35-42 days	20-30 days	6
Altitude					
Natural altitude	18-24 days	10-14 days	28-35 days	12-18 days	20
Simulated altitude	21-28 days	14-18 days	35-42 days	15-21 days	16
Live-high, train-low	21-35 days	14-21 days	42-56 days	18-28 days	12

Implementation Strategies and Effectiveness

Table 8. Implementation Strategy Effectiveness

Strategy	Environment	Effectiveness Rating	Practical Feasibility	Cost Consideration	Recommended Population
Natural Environment Exposure					
Training camps	Heat	High (8.5/10)	Moderate	High	Elite athletes
Training camps	Altitude	Very High (9.2/10)	Low	Very High	Elite/professional
Training camps	Cold	Moderate (6.8/10)	Low	High	Specialized sports

<i>Artificial Environment</i>					
<i>Environmental chambers</i>	Heat	High (8.8/10)	High	Moderate	All levels
<i>Altitude tents/rooms</i>	Altitude	Moderate (7.2/10)	High	Moderate	All levels
<i>Cold chambers</i>	Cold	Moderate (6.5/10)	Moderate	High	Elite athletes
<i>Combined Approaches</i>					
<i>Active + Passive heat</i>	Heat	Very High (9.1/10)	Moderate	Moderate	All levels
<i>Live-high, train-low</i>	Altitude	Very High (9.4/10)	Low	High	Elite athletes
<i>Progressive cold exposure</i>	Cold	Moderate (7.1/10)	High	Low	All levels

Individual Variability Factors

Significant individual variability in acclimatization responses was reported across studies, with several key factors consistently influencing adaptation magnitude and timeline.

Table 9. Individual Variability Factors and Their Impact

Factor	Impact on Heat Response	Impact on Cold Response	Impact on Altitude Response	Effect Size	Studies (n)
Demographic					
Age (>40 vs <25 years)	↓ Moderate	↓ Small	↓ Large	0.6-1.2	28
Sex (Female vs Male)	↓ Small	↑ Small	↔ Minimal	0.2-0.5	35
Body composition (↑ Fat %)	↓ Moderate	↑ Moderate	↓ Small	0.4-0.8	22
Training Status					
VO ₂ max (High vs Low)	↑ Large	↑ Moderate	↑ Very Large	0.8-1.6	42
Training volume	↑ Moderate	↑ Small	↑ Large	0.5-1.1	31
Heat training experience	↑ Large	↔ Minimal	↑ Small	0.7-1.3	18
Physiological					
Sweat rate capacity	↑ Large	↔ Minimal	↔ Minimal	0.8-1.4	16
Body surface area	↑ Moderate	↓ Moderate	↔ Minimal	0.4-0.7	14
Cardiovascular fitness	↑ Large	↑ Moderate	↑ Very Large	0.9-1.8	38
Genetic					
ACE I/D polymorphism	↑ Moderate	↔ Minimal	↑ Large	0.6-1.2	12
Heat shock protein variants	↑ Large	↔ Minimal	↑ Small	0.8-1.5	8
EPAS1 variants	↔ Minimal	↔ Minimal	↑ Very Large	1.2-2.1	6

Legend: ↑ = Positive effect, ↓ = Negative effect, ↔ = Minimal/No effect Effect Size: Small (0.2-0.5), Moderate (0.5-0.8), Large (0.8-1.2), Very Large (>1.2)

DISCUSSION

The comprehensive analysis of 86 studies examining environmental acclimatization and athletic performance reveals a complex landscape of physiological adaptations and performance outcomes that collectively demonstrate the profound impact of structured environmental exposure on human performance capacity. The evidence unequivocally confirms that acclimatization represents a powerful and scientifically validated strategy for enhancing athletic performance in extreme environmental conditions, though the magnitude and characteristics of these benefits vary substantially across different environmental stressors, individual characteristics, and implementation approaches.

The specificity principle emerges as a fundamental concept underlying successful environmental acclimatization, with adaptations showing remarkable precision in matching the characteristics of the environmental stressor encountered during preparation. Heat acclimatization produces coordinated cardiovascular, thermoregulatory, and metabolic adaptations that collectively enhance performance in hot conditions while providing minimal benefit for cold or altitude challenges. Similarly, altitude acclimatization generates hematological and respiratory adaptations specifically designed to address hypoxic stress, with limited cross-transfer to thermal environments. This specificity has profound implications for practical implementation, suggesting that acclimatization protocols must closely mirror anticipated competition conditions to maximize performance benefits.

The dose-response relationship observed across environmental stressors reveals an optimal range of environmental stress exposure that balances adaptive stimulus against excessive physiological strain or training disruption. Heat acclimatization demonstrates the clearest dose-response characteristics, with meaningful adaptations observable within 4-7 days of structured exposure, near-complete adaptation achieved within 10-14 days, and diminishing returns beyond 18-21 days of continuous exposure. Altitude acclimatization shows a more protracted time course, requiring 14-21 days for substantial hematological adaptations and 21-35 days for complete cellular and metabolic adjustments. Cold acclimatization presents the most variable dose-response pattern, with modest adaptations requiring 14-28 days and considerable individual variation in response magnitude.

Individual variability emerges as a critical factor influencing acclimatization outcomes, with response magnitudes varying by factors of 2-3 fold even among individuals with similar baseline characteristics. This variability appears to be influenced by multiple interacting factors including genetic predisposition, training status, previous environmental exposure history, and various demographic characteristics. The substantial individual differences observed across studies underscore the importance of personalized approaches to environmental preparation, moving beyond standardized protocols toward individualized strategies that account for personal response characteristics and optimization potential.

Evaluating in Relation to Antecedent Studies

The findings from this comprehensive review both confirm and extend previous understanding of environmental physiology and acclimatization strategies. The molecular mechanisms underlying environmental adaptation have become increasingly understood through advances in cellular biology and genomics research, revealing that acclimatization involves coordinated responses across multiple physiological systems extending from cellular metabolic adaptations to integrated systemic adjustments. Heat shock protein responses,

mitochondrial biogenesis, and epigenetic modifications now provide mechanistic explanations for the performance benefits observed in earlier descriptive studies.

Cross-adaptation benefits between different environmental stressors have emerged as an important area of scientific development since early environmental physiology research. The demonstration that heat acclimatization can provide ergogenic benefits even in temperate conditions through improved cardiovascular efficiency and cellular stress tolerance represents a significant advancement beyond traditional environment-specific preparation strategies. Similarly, evidence for altitude training benefits at sea level through enhanced oxygen transport capacity and metabolic efficiency has transformed altitude preparation from a purely competition-specific intervention to a general performance enhancement tool.

Technological innovations have dramatically expanded the practical toolkit for implementing acclimatization protocols, making effective environmental preparation strategies more accessible to a broader range of athletes and sporting organizations. Environmental chambers, altitude simulation systems, and sophisticated monitoring technologies have eliminated many of the geographical and logistical barriers that previously limited access to environmental training. This technological democratization has enabled more systematic research approaches and broader practical implementation of evidence-based protocols.

The integration of monitoring technologies has revolutionized the precision with which acclimatization progress can be tracked and protocols can be individualized. Heart rate variability monitoring, core temperature assessment, biochemical markers of adaptation, and performance testing protocols now enable real-time optimization of environmental exposure parameters. This represents a fundamental shift from standardized, population-based protocols toward dynamic, individually-responsive approaches that maximize adaptation efficiency while minimizing unnecessary stress exposure.

Contemporary understanding of environmental physiology has evolved to recognize acclimatization as part of a broader stress adaptation framework that includes training load management, recovery optimization, and integrated preparation strategies. Rather than viewing environmental exposure as an isolated intervention, current best practice integrates environmental preparation within comprehensive periodization models that account for the interaction between environmental stress, training stress, and competition demands.

The practical implications emerging from this comprehensive analysis extend far beyond simple performance enhancement to encompass fundamental changes in how athletic preparation, competition strategy, and athlete safety are conceptualized and implemented in contemporary sports. The demonstration of substantial and consistent performance benefits across diverse environmental conditions provides compelling justification for integrating structured acclimatization protocols as a cornerstone element of elite athletic preparation programs.

Competition preparation strategies must evolve to account for the critical importance of environmental readiness as a distinct preparation domain requiring specific attention, resources, and expertise. The magnitude of performance benefits observed—ranging from 4-12% for heat acclimatization, 3-9% for altitude preparation, and 1-6% for cold adaptation—represents differences that often exceed the margins separating elite competitors. In contemporary elite sports where victories are frequently determined by fractions of percentage points in performance, environmental preparation can provide decisive competitive advantages that justify substantial resource investment.

Training periodization must incorporate environmental preparation as an integral component of annual and quadrennial planning cycles, with strategic positioning of acclimatization phases to optimize competition-specific adaptations while minimizing interference with other training adaptations. The temporal characteristics of adaptation development and decay necessitate precise timing of environmental exposure relative to competition schedules, requiring sophisticated planning and coordination across multiple preparation domains.

Resource allocation decisions within sporting organizations should reflect the substantial performance benefits and competitive advantages available through systematic environmental preparation. The cost-effectiveness of environmental training investments compares favorably to many other performance enhancement strategies, particularly when considering the dual benefits of performance improvement and risk mitigation. Environmental chambers, altitude simulation systems, and monitoring technologies represent capital investments that can provide long-term competitive advantages across multiple athlete cohorts and sporting disciplines.

Risk management protocols must integrate environmental preparation as a crucial safety measure extending beyond performance enhancement to encompass fundamental athlete health protection. The substantial reduction in heat illness, altitude sickness, and cold injury risk achieved through appropriate acclimatization represents a critical duty of care that sporting organizations owe to their athletes. Environmental preparation should be viewed as an essential safety intervention rather than an optional performance enhancement strategy when competition occurs in extreme conditions.

Despite the substantial body of evidence examined in this review, several important limitations must be acknowledged that constrain the generalizability and practical application of current research findings. Methodological heterogeneity represents a persistent challenge in synthesizing environmental physiology research, with variations in protocols, environmental conditions, assessment methods, and participant characteristics complicating direct comparisons between studies and limiting the precision of evidence-based recommendations.

Population limitations significantly constrain the generalizability of current research findings, with most studies focusing on male endurance athletes aged 18-35 years. Female athletes, older competitors, athletes with diverse ethnic backgrounds, and competitors in power-based or skill-dominated sports remain substantially under-represented in the environmental physiology literature. This demographic bias limits the confidence with which current recommendations can be applied to diverse athletic populations and may obscure important response patterns that differ across demographic groups.

Laboratory-based performance measures, while providing controlled and reproducible assessment conditions, may not fully capture the complexity and ecological validity of competitive sporting environments. Field-based competition involves multiple stressors including psychological pressure, tactical decisions, equipment considerations, and environmental variability that laboratory studies cannot

fully replicate. The translation from laboratory-measured improvements to real-world competitive advantages requires validation that is often absent from current research.

Long-term effects of repeated acclimatization cycles throughout an athlete's career remain poorly understood, with most research examining short-term adaptations over periods of weeks to months. The potential cumulative effects of multiple environmental stress exposures, including both beneficial adaptations and possible negative consequences, require systematic longitudinal investigation. Career-long impacts on health, performance capacity, and adaptation potential represent important knowledge gaps that limit long-term planning and athlete welfare considerations.

Integrated approaches examining combined interventions addressing multiple environmental stressors simultaneously remain limited in the current literature, despite the reality that many competitions involve complex environmental challenges combining thermal stress, altitude exposure, and other environmental factors. The interaction effects between different environmental preparation strategies, optimal sequencing of multiple environmental exposures, and potential interference effects between different adaptation processes require systematic investigation to optimize complex environmental preparation strategies.

The molecular and cellular mechanisms underlying environmental acclimatization continue to evolve as research techniques advance and our understanding of adaptive physiology deepens. Heat shock protein responses, mitochondrial adaptations, cardiovascular remodeling, and epigenetic modifications provide increasingly sophisticated explanations for the performance benefits observed through environmental training. This mechanistic understanding offers potential for developing more targeted and efficient intervention strategies that could accelerate adaptation processes or enhance adaptation magnitude.

Genetic factors influencing individual variability in acclimatization responses represent an emerging area of scientific interest with significant practical implications for personalized environmental preparation strategies. Polymorphisms in genes related to heat shock responses, altitude adaptation, cardiovascular function, and metabolic efficiency may enable prediction of individual acclimatization potential and optimization of personalized protocols. The integration of genetic information with physiological monitoring and performance assessment could enable precision medicine approaches to environmental preparation.

Technology integration offers substantial potential for advancing both scientific understanding and practical implementation of environmental acclimatization strategies. Wearable sensors, artificial intelligence analysis of adaptation patterns, virtual reality environmental simulation, and remote monitoring capabilities represent emerging technologies that could revolutionize environmental preparation. The development of predictive models for individual adaptation responses based on multiple data streams could enable real-time optimization of environmental exposure protocols.

Cross-adaptation mechanisms between different environmental stressors require further investigation to understand the physiological basis for observed performance benefits and to optimize integrated environmental preparation strategies. The cellular and systemic mechanisms underlying heat-altitude cross-adaptation, cold-heat interactions, and multi-environmental preparation approaches could inform more efficient and effective preparation strategies that maximize adaptation benefits while minimizing training time and resource requirements.

The evidence synthesized in this review has profound implications for how athletic performance is conceptualized, developed, and optimized in contemporary sports science. Environmental preparation should be recognized as a distinct and essential domain of athletic development, equivalent in importance to traditional training modalities such as strength development, skill acquisition, and tactical preparation. The magnitude of performance benefits available through structured environmental adaptation justifies dedicated expertise, resources, and attention within comprehensive athlete development programs.

Sports science practice must evolve to incorporate environmental physiology expertise as a core competency rather than a specialized niche area. The complexity of optimizing environmental adaptation requires sophisticated understanding of physiological mechanisms, protocol optimization, individual response patterns, and integration with broader training programs. Educational programs for sports scientists, coaches, and practitioners should include comprehensive coverage of environmental physiology principles and practical implementation strategies.

Performance monitoring and assessment protocols should integrate environmental readiness as a distinct performance capacity requiring specific evaluation approaches. Traditional performance testing in temperate laboratory conditions may provide limited insight into competitive capacity in extreme environmental conditions. Environment-specific performance assessment protocols are needed to evaluate adaptation progress, optimize preparation strategies, and predict competitive performance in challenging environmental conditions.

The integration of environmental preparation within broader athlete development frameworks requires sophisticated understanding of the interaction between environmental stress, training load, recovery demands, and adaptation processes. Environmental preparation cannot be viewed as an isolated intervention but must be coordinated with strength training, skill development, tactical preparation, and psychological readiness to optimize overall competitive preparation while managing cumulative stress loads.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future research priorities should address the significant knowledge gaps identified through this comprehensive analysis, focusing on areas that will provide the greatest scientific advancement and practical benefit for athletic performance optimization. Population diversity represents a critical research need, with systematic investigation required across female athletes, older competitors, diverse ethnic backgrounds, and non-endurance sporting disciplines to establish broad applicability of environmental preparation principles.

Longitudinal research examining the career-long impacts of environmental preparation strategies is essential for understanding both the benefits and potential risks associated with repeated environmental stress exposure. Multi-year studies tracking adaptation capacity, health outcomes, and performance development could inform evidence-based guidelines for sustainable environmental preparation throughout athletic careers.

Practical implementation research is needed to bridge the gap between laboratory-based scientific findings and real-world athletic preparation applications. Field-based studies examining the effectiveness of different implementation strategies, resource requirements,

logistical considerations, and integration with existing training programs could provide crucial guidance for coaches and sporting organizations seeking to implement evidence-based environmental preparation.

Technology integration research should focus on developing and validating monitoring systems, prediction models, and intervention strategies that leverage emerging technologies to optimize environmental preparation efficiency and effectiveness. The development of user-friendly, cost-effective technologies that can be implemented across diverse sporting contexts could democratize access to sophisticated environmental preparation strategies.

For practitioners and sporting organizations, the evidence presented in this review supports several key recommendations for implementing effective environmental preparation strategies. Investment in environmental preparation capabilities, including both facilities and expertise, represents a cost-effective strategy for achieving competitive advantages and ensuring athlete safety. The development of systematic protocols for environmental assessment, adaptation monitoring, and performance optimization should be prioritized based on the specific environmental challenges faced by each sporting context. Finally, integration of environmental preparation within comprehensive athlete development programs requires coordinated planning, appropriate resource allocation, and recognition of environmental readiness as an essential component of competitive preparation.

CONCLUSION

Acclimatization represents a foundational strategy for optimizing athletic performance in extreme environmental conditions. The physiological adaptations resulting from structured exposure to heat, cold, and altitude produce meaningful performance benefits across various sporting disciplines. However, the magnitude of these benefits depends significantly on the specificity, timing, and individualization of acclimatization protocols. Heat acclimatization offers the most robust and well-documented performance benefits, with clear protocols established for implementation. Altitude acclimatization demonstrates significant performance improvements at elevation, with additional potential benefits upon return to sea level. Cold acclimatization shows more modest performance enhancements, though research in this area remains comparatively limited.

The future of acclimatization research and practice lies in developing more personalized approaches based on individual response characteristics, leveraging technological innovations for monitoring adaptation progress, and integrating environmental training more systematically within periodized training programs. Additionally, investigating the molecular mechanisms underlying adaptation may yield novel approaches to accelerate or enhance acclimatization responses. For athletes and coaches, implementing evidence-based acclimatization strategies represents not only a crucial performance-enhancement approach but also an essential safety measure when competing in environmental extremes. As global competition increasingly occurs across diverse climate conditions, mastery of acclimatization principles offers a significant competitive advantage in the modern sporting landscape.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the content of this review.

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